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ABSTRACT

Inspired by the gains in student achievement realized by the small schools movement in New York City, the Oakland Unified School District (California) has proposed creating a network of 10 new, small autonomous (NSA) schools over the next 3 years. School size will range between 250 and 500 students, depending on grade level. "Autonomous" means that the school has control over curriculum, instruction, and assessment consistent with state and district standards. Each school controls its own budget, can reallocate funds, and can hire and evaluate teachers and staff. The primary purpose of developing NSA schools is to raise student achievement and close the achievement gap for under-served students. Core principles include: each NSA school must create its own vision and philosophy; each NSA school will be a school of choice, based on interest in the unique program and philosophy of the school; priority for admission will be given to children from overcrowded and low-performing schools; school admissions must reflect district demographics; and new school incubators will be available to assist in development of NSA school designs. In some cases several NSA schools may occupy a single site. Sites will be built or renovated to accommodate small autonomous schools. Policy is presented concerning development of NSA school designs, design team support, leadership and district-level support, school governance, professional development, community engagement, school financing, collective bargaining, and a third-year evaluation to determine whether to modify or terminate the policy. (TD)

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Oakland Unified School District

New Small Autonomous Schools District Policy

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Introduction and Executive Summary

The vision of New Small Autonomous (NSA) Schools in Oakland grows out of more than a year of dialogue and conversations among many people who care deeply about education in Oakland. The word "new" connotes the need for innovation and change. "Small" refers to the often-expressed desire for school environments that are safe, dean, caring, and of a size that allows for deep, personal connections among parents, teachers and students. It also refers to the need for academically rigorous learning environments for urban students who do not currently have access to them. Finally, "autonomous" means that if we are to expect innovation and excellence, we must provide the resources, authority and flexibility for staff and parents at each site to make the changes necessary at the school level. A mounting body of evidence points to precisely these conditions as necessary elements for the reform of urban schools.

In 1998, public school parents, through Oakland Community Organizations (OCO), began organizing for new, small public schools. The small schools movement in New York City, which has made great gains in student achievement over the past twenty years, sparked the interest of many of these parents. As parents and teachers in the Fruitvale district began to develop plans for Oakland's first such school, OCO organized a delegation of parents, educators, and District administrators to investigate the small schools in New York.

Excited by what they saw in New York, OCO convened the New Small Schools Working Group in December 1998 to continue the effort in Oakland. The Bay Area Coalition of Essential Schools (BayCES) and the Museum of Children's Art (MOCHA) joined with OCO as co-convenors of the Working Group, which has met monthly since the spring. It is from conversations and research done by the Working Group that this policy emerges. Many people and organizations have joined these conversations about small schools, including individuals from the Oakland Educators Association (OEA), the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD), the Mayor's Commission on Education, and the Oakland School Board. Oakland teachers (initially a team of teachers from Jefferson Year Round Elementary School), parents, and many interested community members have also participated.

The Research: Smaller Schools Get Better Results for Urban Students

Research has demonstrated school size is a major factor in student academic success (Raywid, 1998; Klonsky, 1998). Small autonomous schools significantly improve the education and achievement of urban students, particularly students of color and low-income students. In addition, small schools achieve these results with a lower cost per graduate than larger schools (Stiefel, Iatarola, Fruchter and Berne, 1998[1])

Research has also shown that well-designed small schools produce the following conditions, which are especially effective for improving the education of low performing and urban students who are not well served by large schools.

1. A sense of belonging.
2. High expectations for student academic work
3. Teaching and learning that is student-centered and inquiry-based
4. Self-assessment and teacher accountability.
5. Decrease in violence.
6. Increase in parental involvement.
7. Locally-generated professional development designed to support teaching and learning (Fine and Somerville, 1998)

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[1] **The research varies greatly on the numbers at which a school becomes, "small." These numbers represent the middle of what is reported in the research as "small."**

*** *A NSA school is not an academy* (three periods during a school day or a small, unit, house, core or program within a larger school. A "school within a school" is not a NSA school because they rarely have autonomous control over the key educational areas of decision making, as outlined in the above explanation of "autonomous."**

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I. Overview of Policy

Over the next three years, Oakland Unified School District will create a network of ten, new, small autonomous schools -- schools of choice for parents, students and teachers. As success is documented, more schools will be approved. This policy, combined with an increase in accountability for results, as well as, professional development and technical assistance at all schools, will positively impact student achievement and revitalize community faith in Oakland Public Schools.

II. Definition of a "New Small Autonomous School"

a) "New" means that the school offers an identifiably new context for teaching and learning, not a repackaging of an existing 'program.

b) "Small" is a range' at each grade level:

Grade Level	Ideal Size Range
K-5	Up to 250
K-8	Up to 400
K-12	Up to 500
6-8	Up to 400
6-12	Up to 500
9-12	Up to 400

c) "Autonomous' means that the school has control over curriculum, instruction and assessment decisions consistent with California State and District Standards, It also controls its own budget and can reallocate funds to increase staffing if it chooses. Autonomy includes hiring and evaluation of teachers and staff consistent with labor contracts. If a school shares a site with other programs, the school does not have to seek permission of the site's cohabitants in order to change its programs though it may have to negotiate site usage issues.

d) Whenever appropriate, NSA schools shall seek alternative school designation in order to achieve maximum flexibility in key areas of design.

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III. Purposes and Accountability for Results

The primary purpose of developing NSA schools is to raise student achievement and close the achievement gap for under-served students by decreasing the size of schools, adhering to high academic standards and increasing the quality choices available to students and parents in OUSD.

a) The Board and Superintendent will be responsible for ensuring that the public understands the goals and priorities of developing NSA schools.

b) The Board and the District will agree to promote and encourage the establishment of new, smaller learning environments across the District, including NSA schools, academies, schools-within-schools, and other kinds of smaller school units.

c) Small schools must identify measurable student outcomes and outline the method by which student progress in meeting the identified student outcomes will be measured. The measurable student outcomes must address overall student achievement as well as equity.

d) The District will develop and use an instrument to measure and report parent, teacher and (where appropriate) student satisfaction for all schools.

e) To continue from year to year as a new small school, the school must demonstrate that a majority of the school's students meet or exceed the school's identified student outcomes.

f) Every school in the District is entitled to an equitable share of resources, technical assistance, leadership and support in meeting its goals.

IV. Core Principles of New Small Schools

New Small School success depends on several key conditions. These conditions, as outlined in the policy and sustained by the district, are the important contributing factors leading to the results demonstrated in the research above.

a) Diversity and Consistency

- Each NSA school must create its own vision and philosophy. Some may emphasize traditional approaches to education, while others are more progressive, emphasizing community issues such as multiculturalism and social justice. Elementary schools may add preschool programs to provide early school experiences for children.

- All schools will be small ranging from 100-400 at the elementary level to 250-400 at the high school level.

- All will have lean, academically oriented programs with high expectations for students, a broadly shared vision, consistent teaching and parent connections and involvement.

- Each NSA school will offer an intimate, caring and safe learning environment where every student and family is known well.

- Each school will help students achieve to high standards and guarantee achievement of higher order literacy in language and mathematics.

b) Choice

- Each NSA School will be a school of choice for students, parents and teachers. Choices will be based on interest in the unique program and philosophy of each school.

- Each NSA school will create and calendar extensive parent, community, student, outreach and orientation sessions during a spring enrollment period to ensure that all community members are aware of their options and able to choose the best school for their child.

- Children will be able to enter schools when, 1) a parent, advocate or organization sponsors them, or 2) a public agency, counselor, or community organization refers the student, or 3) they demonstrate their own commitment to the program.

- Each NSA school will be responsible for selecting its own teachers. To work at a NSA school, a teacher must 1) be **appropriately** credentialed, 2) choose to work there, 3) demonstrate alignment with the school's philosophy, theme and approach to teaching and learning, 4) be offered a position by the leadership structure of the school.

- All NSA school staff members must be committed to the philosophy of NSA schools and meet the required qualifications as described in the district position descriptions.

c) Admissions

- No school can refuse any student who wishes to attend and whose parents or primary caregiver can show that they know and understand the unique aspects, tradeoffs and responsibilities of attending that school except in cases where the demand for admission exceeds the number of spaces available. In such cases, schools will use an equitable selection process, such as a lottery.

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- Priority for admissions will be given to children from attendance areas designated as overcrowded **and children from low-performing schools.** Evidence of overcrowding includes multi-track year round schools and the encroachment of portables on open and play space.

- NSA school admissions **must** reflect the demographics of the district as a whole and **must not** manipulate admissions to drain off the most accomplished, easy to teach or most motivated students.

d) School Employees

- NSA school teachers and other staff are covered under the collective bargaining agreement and receive the same salary, benefits and protections that their comprehensive school counterparts enjoy.

e) Shared Decision-Making and Site-Based Management

- Each site will determine its own schedule, program, staff duties, leadership structure and calendar within a set of broad guidelines. Each site will be allocated dollars according to district formula. Sites will then develop budgets based on their goals for student achievement and their priorities and areas of focus as a school community.

f) Continuous Dissemination of NSA School Opportunities

- A newly established teacher education center will provide ongoing networking and professional development for Oakland teachers, including dissemination of opportunities to join NSA school design teams or fill openings in NSA schools. New School Incubators, entities that help school design teams think through their plans, will be available to coach and assist teams of parents and educators as they develop their NSA school designs.

- The engagement of the community and support agencies is an important component in the NSA schools policy. The District will continue to educate the community about the goals of NSA schools and based on availability of funds host an annual conference.

g) Sites for New Schools

- In some cases, several new small schools may occupy a single site. In others, new schools will occupy existing or new sites, built or renovated especially to accommodate small autonomous schools with innovative, focused academic philosophies and programs.

- Design teams will have opportunities to start new schools/opportunities to start smaller learning environments including houses in middle schools and

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academies at high schools and opportunities for strengthening existing small schools.

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V. Development of NSA School Designs

Groups of educators and parents will apply for NSA status through the District's Request for Authorization (RFA) to start a NSA school process. The RFA will include the criteria for evaluating each proposal. The criteria will include the following:

a) Common credible educational philosophy.
b) A common approach to pedagogy.
c) Clear visionary leadership, capable of inspiring confidence of parents, teachers and students.
d) Revenue neutral school plan. The school is funded by the ADA and categorical funds generated by students who attend the school. The school must not be dependent on additional district funds.
e) Partnership with parents and community.
f) An approach to recruiting students and staff. All NSA schools are schools of choice.
g) Establish contact with all employee unions in an effort to generate support for the program of the school. All employees will be guaranteed union membership as well as appropriate wages and benefits.
h) A school staff and student population that reflects the **District's demographics**, cultural heritage, and values.

i) A school design that specifies the size of the school, grades levels to be served, **class size** and includes a plan for expansion, if applicable.
j) Site availability.
k) A plan for defining school success that includes the following:
- Grades.
- Standardized test results (STAR), and other multiple measures of student achievement.
- Staff and student attendance.
- Staff retention.
- Parent, staff and student satisfaction (i.e.surveys).
- Safety.

l) The Superintendent will appoint an advisory committee to evaluate each NSA school proposal. Each NSA school must be approved by the Board of Education.
m) A plan for achieving a racial and ethnic balance among teachers and students that reflects the District's demographics.

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VI. Design Team Support

a) Recognizing the need for innovation and responsible experimentation, the District, with support of outside funding, will offer resources, (e.g., release time and technical assistance) to those who develop designs in collaboration with parents and other educators.

b) Any current Oakland school with the partnership and support of its community may decide to divide into smaller units and participate voluntarily in the NSA school development process.

c) The District in collaboration with parents, will identify priority needs for school design; elementary, middle schools, high schools.

d) "Incubator". This will be an independent and collaborative entity of experts and support staff who will work together to provide design teams with new and additional resources, coaching, and technical assistance. The Incubator will also act as a clearinghouse for other sources of support and for university and business partnerships.

e) Programs and services of the NSA School incubator will be available to teachers, parents and other members of the Oakland community.

VII. Leadership and District Level Support

a) The Superintendent will designate a staff member to oversee the development of a network of up to 10 new schools over the next three years.

b) The District along with external partners, will actively seek resources to create a small team of coaches and facilitators to assist with the development of NSA schools and to provide them with opportunities to network and share progress.

c) The District, with the assistance of the City, commits to finding locations each year for new schools. These locations may be new sites, and/or subdivisions of existing sites.

d) The New Schools designee reports directly to the Superintendent or his/her designee, and will be a person with a strong vision and the authority to advocate in support of the New Small Schools Initiative.

VIII. School Governance

a) All NSA Schools will be governed by the OUSD School Site Decision-Making Policy.

b) Each, school shall create a governance structure that provides for leadership and administration of the school in accordance with state and federal mandates (e.g., three schools occupying the same site might combine resources to get a Site Manager/ Administrator and use their school budget for a Lead Teacher to be the educational leader).

c) Each school's governance structure gives parents, teachers and other school staff decision-making roles on the issues that directly concern them. However, all decision-making processes must both support the philosophy and theme of the school and be focused an higher and more equitable student achievement.

d) All NSA schools governance structures and bylaws must be approved by the Superintendent.

IX. Teacher-run Professional Development

a) The District will collaborate with other agencies to create a district wide Teacher Center. The Teacher Center will house information and materials to share with teachers interested in developing NSA Schools.

X. Parent and Community Education and Engagement and Review of Progress

a) The District will ~~prioritize~~ **give preference for** NSA school development in the areas where schools are most overcrowded **and in the areas with low-performing schools**.

b) The District, in partnership with other agencies, will sponsor an annual Community Conference on NSA schools. This conference will infuse Oakland with new visions and ideas for schools from other cities involved in NSA school development. OUSD NSA schools will also present at these conferences.

c) The District will engage in outreach and information campaigns to inform the public of its options and choices relative to attending schools.

d) NSA schools will engage their communities in an annual review of progress. Their management team will share accomplishments, account for results achieved and share plans for the coming year.

XI. NSA School Financing

a) NSA schools will be "revenue neutral".

b) The District will create a basic funding formula for all schools which includes

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all funds to which they are entitled.

XII. Collective Bargaining

a) The District will seek contract language with OEA and all other employee unions which will facilitate the formation, support, and sustainability of NSA schools.

XIII. Evaluation of Effectiveness of NSA Policy

A. In year three of implementation of this policy, the Superintendent shall contract for an interim evaluation of the effectiveness of the new small autonomous school approach authorized under this policy and shall report to the Board of Education with recommendations to modify, expand, or terminate the policy. The evaluation shall include, but shall not be limited to, the following factors:

1. **The pre- and post- NSA school test scores of students attending NSA schools and other student assessment tools.**

2. **The level of parental satisfaction with the NSA school approach compared with non-NSA district schools.**

3. **The impact of required parental involvement.**

4. **The fiscal structures and practices of NSA schools, including the amount of revenue received from various public and private sources.**

5. **An assessment of whether the NSA school policy has resulted in increased student achievement and student satisfaction (measured by truancy, tardiness, dropout rates, etc.)**

6. **The level of teacher satisfaction with the NSA school approach compared with non-NSA district schools.**

7. **The existence of any discrimination and/or segregation in NSA schools and the existence of inequitable distribution of resources throughout the District.**

8. **The number of NSA school applications submitted and denied and the number and reasons for the revocation of NSA school status.**

9. **The governance, fiscal liability and accountability practices and related issues between NSA schools and the District.**

10. The role and impact of collective bargaining on NSA schools.

11. An assessment of the key success factors for Oakland NSA schools.

B. The Superintendent shall establish a system for collecting the data necessary to evaluate the effectiveness of the Oakland NSA school policy.

C. All NSA schools shall cooperate in the keeping and collecting of data necessary to evaluate the effectiveness of the Oakland NSA school policy.

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